

Transitioning to College: Helping You Succeed

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Brian's Search Strategy Advice

If you are using an online catalog to find books or a database to find articles, you will need to have a strategy for entering the words. Entering a string of words like you do on the Web seems like the best way to go, but it doesn't always give you the best results.

Follow these steps to create a search strategy that will help you find what you need!

Step 1: Write down your research question or topic.

For example: What is the effect of television violence on children?

TIP: Topics that are too broad will result in too many sources; topics that are too narrow will cause frustration when searching. Getting feedback from your instructor or librarian on your topic can save you time and headaches later.

Step 2: Identify the main ideas of your topic. In this example, there are three main ideas -- **television**, **violence**, and **children**.

TIP: *Television violence* is a phrase. When you do your search, you can enter the phrase "television violence" for one of your main concepts, but also try entering the words separately (television and violence) since you will get different results with each method.

Step 3: Write each of these words in a separate column on your search worksheet or on a piece of paper. Sometimes you will have two main ideas; sometimes you will have four. It just depends on your topic.

COLUMN 1
television

COLUMN 2
violence

COLUMN 3
children

Step 4: Under each main idea, write down words that mean the same thing (synonyms). Sometimes you will have many synonyms; sometimes you won't have any. There is no one correct way to do this!



For example, under **children**, you may want to identify age groups like teenagers or preschoolers.

Since some articles might use the word TV instead of television, write the word TV in the **television** column.

Keep in mind that a book or article on media and violence and children might include information about television violence. Write the word “media” under the television column.

TIP: It is very, very important that the words in each column all relate to the same idea.

Step 5: Now look at your list of words and see if you can truncate any of them. Truncation means placing a wild card (like the asterisk) at the end of the root of a word so that you can different forms of the word.

For example, truncate **teenagers** to **teen*** in order to get all forms of the word – **teen, teens, teenaged, teenager, teenagers.**

Step 6: You are now ready to try your searches. Choose one word from each column and combine them with the word **AND**. Words from the same column need to be separated by the word **OR**.

Here are some sample search statements.

television AND violence AND children

television AND violence AND children

(television OR TV OR media) AND violence AND teenagers

television AND aggression AND preschoolers

Step 7: When you do the searches, you will find that some combinations work well and others don't. Keep trying different variations.

If you don't get enough results, take out one of the concepts. If you get too many results, add in another concept.

TIP: Look at your search results for clues to other words that might work in your search. Then try adding those words to your mix and match search columns.